

Black Magic Question Mark

JOHN STARR COOKE

IGNORANCE . . .," the Old One sighed, "Ignorance is the cross upon which truth is daily condemned. Ignorance, fear, and foolish superstition!"

"Do you mean to tell me there is no such thing as black magic? . . . I can prove it!"

The Old One shook his head. "That's not what I mean. There is magic, great magic, both black and white; but that which is considered magic by most people is only a trick done with mirrors. Real magic goes much deeper than the magic of illusion. Surface appearances which to the ignorant seem black are often white; those which appear to be wondrously white are sometimes the blackest. No! We cannot separate the black from the white by superficial and emotional superstition. It is only by knowledge that we may learn to distinguish the false from the true: our own knowledge which exists apart from the collective knowledge we have garnered from others. Knowledge which is impersonal and, within that impersonality, eternal. Impersonal, unprejudiced knowledge. And then one can distinguish the black from the white only for oneself. Never for another. Interpretation of magic depends entirely upon the personal level of understanding and development. Since we are such transient beings, magic in itself is also transient. Let me tell you a story . . ."

"A long one?"

"Not too long and not too short. Hand me the fan on the table there. It's hot and these beastly flies stick to my skin."

"Flies are a sign of the devil!"

"They are to you. To me they are an indisputable sign of rain," laughed the Old One. He stirred up a breeze within the sultry shack. And he began his tale:

"Many moons ago upon this earth of ours, there dwelt in the fair city of Milan one of the greatest of men. He was a man of such rare impersonal understanding that he was much feared. It was said of him that he was the Anti-Christ come to destroy the Kingdom of Heaven and loose the fiery furies to inflame the world with evil. You see, he was a painter; and though artists were much loved by some, they were looked upon with uncommon suspicion by the general populace. Artists were considered too 'modern,' their ideas too extreme; and so many of the more advanced among

them were condemned by the Church along with witches, necromancers and alchemists. Leonardo was, perhaps, the most suspected of the lot. Not only did he paint in a way the general public did not understand but he dived into all sorts of terrible new fangled ideas. Turn on that electric fan . . . drive away these intolerable flies!"

"Do you mean you are talking about Leonardo Da Vinci?" The Other switched on the fan.

"I am," smiled the Old One. "I was only a boy when I knew him. I was apprenticed to a butcher . . . a revolting job. It was just such a hot sticky evening as this one. The flies were just as thick. I was taking care of the shop . . ."

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The smell of meat in the shop is suffocating. Upon the counter (a flat wooden board on four roughly carved legs) lies half a carcass of beef. Hawkers cry. The baker is throwing bundles of bread onto the roof above the butcher shop. A flower seller smiles brightly over her nasturtiums. The old clock in the square bongs ten times. Throngs of people jostle each other. Old men stand about combing their beards and getting in the way of gossiping women. Young men are out strolling, with their hands and eyes upon giggling girls. Children and birds make a continual racket.

The young Lucca is in the shop trying desperately to clean up the frightful mess left over from a day's work. How he loathes it! How he loathes this place! Lucca, the gentle Lucca, who cried so when Antonio, his father, killed a soft grey mouse. Lucca, il gentilissimo, apprenticed to a butcher!

The boy sits in tears as he gingerly handles the dreadful red stuff. Suddenly he hears a voice. . . .

"Why do you do it?" (A man stands before him. A man who looks like a god.) "It's not your work. . . ."

"I beg your pardon, sir," says Lucca, rising swiftly. "What will it be, sir?" He picks up the dreadful heavy knife.

"How much do you earn here?"

"What? . . . Two soldi . . ."

"What's your name?"

"Lucca."

"Come with me, Lucca. You must not work

here. Here is no realization of life in store for you. You are David who slew Goliath: young, open, revolted by the dead and the dying. You can model for me as the eternal David. Come with me, Lucca.' . . .

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"And so," continued the Old One, "that is how I became part of Messer Leonardo's household. Living with Leonardo I began to understand how very unimportant are the many separate existences which seemingly make up life. Nobody could be with the master for long without becoming part of his very being. It may seem contradictory but he was so absolutely impersonal in all ways that one could not help but become a part of his impersonality. One had a continual feeling of being at once detached and together in detachment. It was just as he used to say of water. 'Water,' he said, 'is Life as Life is like unto water. We must move with it, not against it. We must feel ourselves immersed in it. We must taste it. We must listen to it and smell it and see it; yet most important of all, we must conjoin these many separate senses into the one sense of being the very moving water itself. All our knowledge originates in our sensibilities. The common sense is that which judges the things given it by the other senses. Therefore, all knowledge may be had by meditating upon water. Water is Light in manifestation and we are creatures of Light.' Study these words. They are wisdom.

"Then one day a terrible thing happened. You must understand that my father was most upset that I had run away to the master Leonardo. He believed Leonardo to be a sorcerer, and my change of occupation confirmed his belief. I remember how he used to wait for me in dark corners of the streets. He would grab me by the collar and take me home. After beating me and cursing me he would lock me in a small room. I would usually escape, somehow, soon afterwards, and go back to the atelier before nightfall.

"However, this day my father locked the door and barred it as well. I heard him leave the house, but I could not get out. Finally in desperation I broke away the lattice. I had an ugly feeling that all was not well with my master. I ran, frightened, to his home.

"Leonardo was up waiting for me. This in itself was not a good sign, as he usually paid little heed to the comings and goings of his household. He bade me enter the room in which he had been working upon the portrait

of the boy David. Saying nothing, he pointed to the spot where the beautiful canvas had stood. It was gone!

"What has happened?" I cried out.

"They have taken it."

"Who?"

"Your father, Antonio; he and a bunch of hoodlums. The ignorant are under the control of ignorance this night. Come. You shall see what fools the senses of desire make of men. You shall see for yourself that the only reliable sense is one's own knowledge which is common sense!" . . .

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The market square again. Late at night this time. Perhaps two in the morning. Darkness. Stillness. Heavy clouds overhead. Nobody in the square but Leonardo and Lucca who are standing quietly within the shadow of an arch. The fountain splashes softly. All else is silence.

Then from the distance come dim but determined sounds of hubub. Closer and closer. Leonardo looks at the boy and smiles his curious smile.

From the absolute darkness of the cloudy night, the whole square is suddenly and startlingly aflame with lights. As if from nowhere a crowd of people has gathered. Torches flare. Mutterings grow to hisses, yells and indistinguishable sounds. Animal sounds. Children scream excitedly. Lucca notices how at night everything looks black and white and red.

From the midst of this whirling angry turmoil, Lucca hears the shouting of his father . . . 'Burn him! To the stake with Messer Leonardo! He has verily bewitched my son!'

Now Lucca sees his father standing drunkenly upon the shelf of the splashing marble fountain. Over his head, Antonio has raised the portrait of David. There is a tense expectant hush within the crowd.

"This is my son, Lucca!" cries Antonio, pointing with one hand at the exquisite David. "This is my son as he stands bewitched! See how he is naked! See how he smiles! See how the light of the devil shines forth from his eyes! And I, his poor father, see how his very soul has been drunk up as a draught of wine by this so-called master of the arts! Master of the arts! Yes! Master of the black arts!" Leonardo lays his hand upon Lucca's trembling shoulder. "I leave it up to you to judge. You have been but now to my house. You have seen how my son has broken apart the lattice and escaped as if by magic. You are the judges, but if you judge justly, you will destroy him just

as I now shall destroy this mirror of evil which I hold before your eyes as a testimony of witchery!" With this Antonio takes a long knife and slices the masterpiece into fluttering strips. The crowd stares.

Before Leonardo can stop him, Lucca screams, "Stop! Stop it! It's not true! You must not believe this man!"

The crowd turns with an angry sweep towards the source of the thin piercing voice.

"It's my son," shouts Antonio. "They are here. The devil and his prodigy. God has delivered them into our hands!" With one movement people spring towards Lucca as if to grab him, but Leonardo steps quietly in front of him.

"There! There stands the Anti-Christ, the Florentine devil! The stake is too good for him! Crucify him! Crucify him!"

The crowd swirls in toward the intensely still Leonardo. But there is something about the master makes them shy off like timid sheep. There are excited mutterings of "spell-binder," "evil one." Two women snatch up their children and hiding their faces run in panic from the square.

"What's the matter? Are you afraid? Crucify him! Crucify the blasphemer!" yells Antonio. With one sweep of his hairy arm, he throws the wreck of the superb painting into the tinkling fountain and leaps down toward the concentrated Leonardo. There is a moment's pause; then the crowd follows him in a determined rush toward the still man and the frightened child.

"Where is he?" "He's here!" "He's gone!" "He's away!" "The boy?" "Gone!" "Vanished!" "Both of them!" Gesticulations, exclamations, prayers. It is true. What they have seen standing before them has disappeared before their very eyes.

"Black magic!" "Witchery!" "Back to our homes!" "Leave this unholy spot!" "The Devil's abroad!" Flares scatter, voices call, children cry . . .

The square is empty. The fountain splashes quietly upon the remains of the mutilated painting of the naked David. It begins to rain.

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"Yes, that's the way it was. Seems like a dream now. So many centuries ago."

"I don't understand. What happened?" said the Other.

"Magic," replied the Old One, simply.

"You mean to say you both really disappeared?"

"I do. You see Leonardo knew much more than even history has given him credit for. Much more than you will ever find in his *Notebooks*, as you know them. However, there are books that he has written . . . Think of it! He was accused of being the greatest black magician of the age! You can understand by that how thoroughly people are influenced by superstition!"

"What, exactly, do you mean?" said the Other, feeling a mysterious flicker of excitement vibrating through the room.

"I mean that we must be more than careful to unearth for ourselves the truth behind all things . . . the eternal truth, that is; not the momentary, relative, personal truth. We must be doubly careful when we speak of magic. There are so few of us who can speak of magic with the knowledge of understanding."

"You mean that Leonardo Da Vinci was *not* a black magician?"

"I should say he was not!" said the Old One, dropping his fan in astonishment at the stupidity of the Other. "Leonardo Da Vinci was . . ." . . . But at that moment a gust of wind flung open the rickety screen door and with it came a noisesome buzzing. The Old One got busy swatting out right and left with the back of his hand.

"Flies! Flies! All your tribes of Beelzebub are upon us!" he said disgustedly. And with that he picked up his palm leaf fan, walked toward the doorway

and disappeared.

. . . members of our Society live, act, speak, and even think under the observation of those Masters from whom no secrets of nature can be hidden if they choose to explore her arcana . . . For it is proved that not only are the images of the Past in the "fadeless picture galleries of the Akasha" but also the sounds of past voices, even the perfumes of archaic flowers . . .

—H. P. BLAVATSKY